

# An Achilles for the new millennium

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As the protagonist of one of the most famous poems in Western literature Achilles has never ceased to fascinate. He has been an inspirational and influential figure over the last seven centuries in literature, music, and the performing and visual arts. But he is also an ambiguous character, who can be read in many, seemingly contradictory, ways. On the one hand he has been glamorized and celebrated as the archetypal warrior, illustrating the central position that war and masculinity occupy in Western culture and thought. On the other hand Achilles has been seen as a tragic figure, coming face to face with his own destiny, and rediscovering moderation and humanity through suffering and loss.

## Achilles: star of film and book

Readers of *Omnibus* will no doubt have rushed to see Wolfgang Peterson's new film *Troy*, released earlier this year, which raised questions about Achilles as a symbol of sexual fantasies and anxieties. The casting of Brad Pitt in the role of Achilles opened up new aspects to the screen persona of the Homeric hero. But over the past few decades literature and theatre have repeatedly scrutinized and questioned the values upon which Achilles' glamour is based, and have explored more problematic aspects of his character. Each treatment is quite distinctive, reflecting the preoccupations and historical circumstances of the authors concerned. Jonathan Shay's study *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994), for example, sees Achilles' aggressiveness and depression as a medical condition, calling for our understanding and compassion rather than condemnation. The archetypal warrior is presented as a victim of war, suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, thus becoming a symbol of the moral destruction brought about by war.

Many recent adaptations of the *Iliad* have developed a strong interest in Achilles as a symbol of masculinity. The Achilles of DV8's dance drama *Enter Achilles* challenges the sexual and social stereotypes of contemporary British masculinity by questioning the collective ethos and mentality of a drinking-at-the-pub culture. In the short animation film *Achilles* by Barry Purves, the intimacy of the relation between Achilles and Patroclus is played out against the brutality of the Trojan war. In a recent stage production of Christopher Logue's *War Music*, the Verse Theatre Manhattan explored the sexual potential of the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus by means of an all-female cast.

## Elizabeth Cook: re-writing Achilles

Achilles, as a heroic figure, has clearly provoked many different interpretations, but here I shall focus on his representation in a recent novel by Elizabeth Cook, entitled *Achilles* (Methuen, 2002), which engages with some of the themes mentioned above, while also reflecting more generally on the ways in which a Greek hero can be made relevant to the modern world. Strictly speaking, Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* is not a novel, but a narrative play or an extended monologue. It is best enjoyed if recited – ideally to the accompaniment of the flute, as at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2000 and on the platform of the Royal

Shakespeare Company in February 2001. It is a short text (just over hundred pages) but it reworks, in a refreshing and innovative manner, numerous mythological and literary narratives about Achilles.

Its first part ('Two Rivers') tells the story of the hero from the union of his parents to his death at Troy in something like a flashback mode, starting with his posthumous encounter with Odysseus in the underworld. If part one focuses on Achilles' life, part two ('Gone') provides a reflection on Achilles' death and its implications for three mythological characters: his mother Thetis, Helen, the woman who could have been the perfect match for Achilles, and finally the centaur Chiron, who brought up the hero on Mount Pelion. With a huge leap in time, part three ('Relay') takes us to early nineteenth-century London and the romantic poet John Keats, who appears in the text as a character, the 'little poet' contemplating the meanings that 'the large Achilles' acquires in his life and work.

## Exploring feelings and desires

Cook deals with the various episodes of Achilles' biography in a broadly linear but highly personal manner. Well-known passages of the *Iliad*, such as the description of Achilles' shield in book 18 and the description of Agamemnon's gifts to Achilles in book 9, are reduced to passing references. Other mythological episodes are totally reshaped and expanded, as for instance the sexual union of Thetis and Peleus, Achilles' relation with the daughter of the king of Scyros Lycomedes, or his love for and slaughter of the Amazon Penthesileia.

Despite the epic subject matter, the narrative is rather lyrical, dense, swift, full of images, thoughts and emotions. It focuses not on action but on the nuances of individual motivation and feeling; not on the accomplishment of deeds but on their perception, the way they are lived and experienced. Cook transforms the world of Achilles into a post-Freudian platform for the exploration of the human psyche and relationships. The glimpses with which it provides us into the mind and body of its characters is one of the most striking features of the narrative.

This holds true not only for the major characters but also for the lesser ones. Patroclus, for instance, whose presence is surprisingly limited, reflects on the power of Achilles' love for him and the knowledge that he is not able to return his love with the same intensity. Agamemnon weeps at the sight of the dead Achilles, 'ashamed now of his greed'. And when Odysseus meets Achilles in the underworld, he still feels that Achilles despises him 'for trying too hard'.

*They honour and respect him, keep a wise distance, because Achilles was better than all the rest. Better at being human. Fighting, singing, speaking, raging (oh, he is good at that still). Killing. But Patroclus alone is humbled by Achilles' love. Only a fool thinks that to be more loved than loving gives power.*

## Keats: bringing Achilles to London

The last section of the text is arguably the most ambitious and

puzzling. This is not only because of the temporal leap from the mountains and plains of Greek myth to Romantic London. It is also because of a significant change of tone and mood when the narrative suddenly becomes more thoughtful and self-aware. The transition from the initial section which is devoted to Achilles' life to the final one which focuses on the meaning the hero has for a modern reader is prepared for by the middle section where Thetis, Helen and Chiron inhabit a world which the dead Achilles has already left.

Keats shows how aspects of Achilles' character resurface through the centuries in unexpected ways and contexts. For instance, at the end of the narrative Keats is given great pleasure by the thought that cutting off a lock of his hair links him with the mourning Achilles, who performed the same symbolic gesture for his dead friend Patroclus. Keats' witnessing of a human dissection and his ability to read the anatomical details of the human body recalls Thetis sifting through the ashes of her son's funeral pyre for his bones. In both cases clinical knowledge of the human body is combined with empathy and understanding for what is dead and gone, yet familiar and dear.

In both cases the narrative brings together reflections on mortality with thoughts on the relationship between the inheritance of the literary past and poetic creativity. On the one hand the narrative celebrates Achilles' survival long after his death, explaining the needs it serves and the ways in which it is made possible. On the other hand, the personal and distinctive style of the final section of the novel illustrates the difficulties of transposing Greek myths and heroes to modern contexts. Because they mean different things to different people, they run the risk of being transformed beyond the point of recognition.

*The large Achilles (on his prest-bed lolling)  
From his deepe Chest, laughes out a lowd applause*

*As Keats reads these lines he feels a little flood of satisfaction. He strokes them appreciatively with his thumb. The way the accents fall, on 'large', on 'prest-bed' – you can feel the weight of the man sinking into his bed, the words pressing, like the printer's ink, into the page. He takes his pencil to underline, to double underline this place. His chest eases, as if it were its won deep chest freeing itself.*

### **Achilles linking past and present**

Cook's Achilles conveys an atmosphere which is both mythic, remote in time and space, and at the same time modern, close to the contemporary reader and listener. It is about continuities and discontinuities, the sameness and otherness, the similarities and differences that shape our understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and the relation between present and past. It is a narrative which encourages us to accept suffering and even war as an inevitable part of the human condition. Yet it is also a narrative that comforts and consoles the reader. Cook restores Achilles to his position as a symbol for mortality and greatness, but she also seeks to redefine his meanings to accommodate the experiences, and above all the feelings and emotions, which pass on from generation to generation and which run in the veins of human beings and through the pages of poetry and literature.

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